Councilmatic NYC and Implications for Civic Tech Sustainability

I. The Life Cycle of Councilmatic NYC

- **Origin and Early Development:** Councilmatic originated in Philadelphia. Its adaptation in NYC by a team aimed to create a third-party watchdog in the civic tech community.
- **Funding Struggles:** Facing financial difficulties and funder pressures to align with the city's narrative, the team reluctantly handed Councilmatic NYC over to the City Council. This immediately led to the disabling of key features like commenting, suggesting a shift away from open public discourse.
- **Council Management and Decline:** Despite negotiations with DataMade for maintenance, the City Council ultimately discontinued Councilmatic NYC abruptly after a change in leadership.
- **Key Lessons:** The project's lifespan under the City Council lasted less than a year, highlighting the vulnerability of civic tech initiatives dependent on political will and individual champions within government.

II. Challenges of Sustainability in Civic Tech

- **Funding Models:** Securing sustainable funding remains a significant hurdle. Councilmatic NYC's struggles to raise funds, even with a potential user base of 15,000 and existing user base of 1,000. The lack of willingness to pay among users demonstrates the difficulty of establishing viable revenue streams. The pressure to align with government narratives to attract funding can compromise a project's independence and critical function.
- **Government Partnerships:** While government partnerships can offer access to data and resources, they can also introduce risks. Councilmatic NYC's experience demonstrates how changes in political leadership and priorities can lead to abrupt project termination. The disabling of commenting features upon government takeover highlights the potential for conflicts of interest and the suppression of critical voices.
- **Community Engagement and Ownership:** Building a strong community around a civic tech project is essential for its long-term success. Councilmatic NYC's limited outreach, primarily through BetaNYC, suggests a missed opportunity to cultivate broader community support and ownership.

III. Strategies for Building Sustainable Civic Tech

- **Diversified Funding:** Explore diverse funding models beyond government grants and user subscriptions, including philanthropic support, partnerships with businesses, and crowdfunding campaigns.
- **Clear Agreements and Transition Plans:** When partnering with government entities, establish clear agreements outlining roles, responsibilities, and exit strategies to ensure project continuity in the face of political or personnel changes.
- **Strong Community Building:** Invest in community outreach and engagement from the outset to build a loyal user base and foster a sense of ownership. This can include user feedback mechanisms, public forums, and collaborative development processes.
- **Focus on Unique Value Proposition:** Develop a clear and compelling

value proposition that differentiates the project from existing government resources. Councilmatic NYC's powerful search functionality, for example, could have been leveraged as a key selling point.

- **Targeted Marketing and Outreach:** Identify key user groups and tailor marketing efforts to reach them effectively. For Councilmatic-like projects, engaging advocacy groups, lobbyists, and community board members could be a viable strategy.

IV. The Legacy of Councilmatic NYC and the Future of Civic Tech

Despite its ultimate demise, Councilmatic NYC left a positive legacy. It demonstrated the potential of civic tech to hold power accountable, influenced the opening of a city council API, and provided valuable lessons for future projects. By learning from Councilmatic NYC's challenges and adopting sustainable strategies, civic tech initiatives can play a vital role in fostering transparency, promoting citizen engagement, and strengthening democratic processes. The key is to balance the benefits of government partnerships with the need for community ownership, independent funding, and a clear focus on long-term sustainability.